

Learning to Talk and Listen

An oral language resource for early childhood caregivers



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National Institute for Literacy

The National Early Literacy Panel

The National Early Literacy Panel was convened in 2002 to conduct a synthesis of the most rigorous scientific research available on the development of early literacy skills in children from birth to age 5. The primary purpose of the Panel was to identify research evidence that would contribute to decisions in educational policy and practice which could help early childhood caregivers better support young children's language and literacy development.

The Panel's work represents a major contribution to the early literacy knowledge base and a significant step in helping early childhood educators understand what the research says about the early literacy skills that are essential for future success in reading. Through an extensive review of the research literature, the Panel identified studies with the strongest findings and synthesized these data using rigorous analytical techniques to answer important questions about the relationship between early skill development and later literacy achievement, and the impact of instructional interventions on children's learning.

In January 2009, the Panel released its final report. The report provides detailed information about the Panel, its charge, the methodology and analytical approach used to conduct the synthesis, and, most importantly, the research findings and implications for improving early education. For more information about the Panel and to download a copy of the report, visit www.nifl.gov.

Cornerstones: An Early Literacy Series

The National Institute for Literacy has prepared this series of research-based publications to support early literacy practices. The publications draw on some of the National Early Literacy Panel's findings about early literacy development and suggest instructional practices in early childhood education to support children's acquisition of literacy skills related to future success in reading.

Learning to Talk and Listen: An oral language resource for early childhood caregivers is the second booklet in this series. It summarizes the research findings on the relationship between young children's oral language skills and their later reading achievement, and suggests implications for early literacy practices to promote children's language development.



Learning to Talk and Listen:

An oral language resource for early childhood caregivers

INTRODUCTION

Learning to Talk and Listen is intended for early childhood caregivers—teachers in centers and those caring for children in homes. It is intended to help caregivers learn more about how children develop the ability to **use words** to communicate their thoughts and needs and ask questions, and to **understand language they hear** in conversations and in books. Why is this important? Because preschool children’s understanding of the meaning of words and concepts and of other aspects of language such as sentence structure and listening comprehension, which they learn through their language interactions, are key foundational skills for later reading achievement. This booklet starts by summarizing the research on children’s language development. It then presents themes about how to help children build their oral language skills during the preschool years.

You can use this resource to...

- learn about the development of oral language skills in the preschool years
- understand the important role that oral language skills play in children’s later reading and thinking skills, and
- find out how to create an environment that helps children build strong oral language skills

A **Quick Reference Guide** to literacy terms is provided at the end of this booklet.



Oral Language Development from Infancy to Preschool

Oral language development includes critical skills that let children (1) communicate—listen and respond when other people are talking. (2) understand the meaning of a large number of words and concepts that they hear or read. (3) obtain new information about things they want to learn about, and (4) express their own ideas and thoughts using specific language.

Oral language development is a critical foundation for reading, writing, and spelling, and it is the “engine” of learning and thinking. Research suggests that young children’s ability to use language and to listen to and understand the meaning of spoken and written words is related to their later literacy achievement in reading, writing, and spelling.

Oral language skills start developing in infancy and continue to develop throughout life.

INFANTS listen to and become aware of sounds of the words being spoken by the adults around them. Very early on children begin to communicate their own needs through sounds and gestures.

TODDLERS use language to express feelings and ideas and seek information. They begin to talk in simple sentences, ask questions and give opinions about likes and dislikes.

YOUNG PRESCHOOLERS build a larger vocabulary from the language of people around them and from new ideas in books. They tell make-believe stories and talk about things and events that are not in the here-and-now, such as things they cannot see, events that have already happened or might happen in the future. They use language that is more complex, with complete sentences and sentences with multiple parts.



Shared Conversations: Talking with Children

Children of all ages enjoy talking with the adults in their lives, including their parents, teachers and caregivers. Talking is one of the most natural things we do with the children in our care, sometimes without even thinking about doing it. When we talk about our day, sit down to snack or lunch we can help build important language skills through our conversations. Caregivers can do more *intentionally* to **build children's oral language development**. They can help children build language skills both through their own language interactions with children and by setting up an environment that gives children lots of reasons to talk and things to talk about.

One of the best ways that caregivers can help children develop their oral language skills is through shared conversations with them. Shared storybook reading provides an especially good platform for conversations with children. These language interactions are the basis for building children's understanding of the meaning of a large number of words, which is a crucial ingredient in their later ability to comprehend what they read.

Children need practice having conversations with the important adults in their lives. By talking with preschool children, you can help children build speaking and listening skills. Talking with other people—using language to ask questions, to explain, to ask for what they need, to let people know how they feel—is one of the important ways that children build language and understanding. Learning to listen while others talk is another important avenue for learning.

How Adults Talk with Children Matters

HOW caregivers talk with children is important. To help children develop strong oral language skills, it's important for caregivers to be sure that their language interactions are the kinds that give children practice with the following things:

1. Hearing and using rich and abstract vocabulary
2. Hearing and using increasingly complex sentences
3. Using words to express ideas and to ask questions about things they don't understand
4. Using words to answer questions about things that are not just in the here-and-now

Caregivers can do this by thinking about the ways they interact with the children in their care. Who does most of the talking? Whose voices are heard the most in the classroom or care setting? The child should be talking at least half the time instead of the teacher or caregiver. There is a real difference between talking *with* children when the conversation is shared and the caregiver listens versus talking *at* children where the caregiver does all the talking and the children listen. What kind of language is the caregiver using? Is it rich and complex? Does the caregiver ask children questions that require children to use language to form and express abstract ideas?

TURN-TAKING. The richest talk involves many “back-and-forth” turns in which the provider builds on and connects with the child’s statements, questions and responses. These extended conversations help children learn how to use language and understand the meaning of new words they encounter listening to other people or in reading books. They also often involve different kinds of sentences—questions and statements—and may include adjectives and adverbs that modify the words in children’s original statements, modeling richer descriptive language.

For example, a child may start a conversation by showing the caregiver a just-completed drawing:

Child: “Look, it’s me in the garden with my Grandma.”

Teacher: (builds on the child’s statement and asks a question that encourages the child to continue), “Yes, I see. Your grandmother is holding something in her hand. What is it?”

Child: “It’s carrots. We planted the seeds together. Grandma told me how to put the seeds in the dirt, but not touching each other.”

Teacher: (asks a question that encourages the child to use language to express an abstract thought) “What would happen if the seeds did touch each other when you planted them?”

The caregiver could then continue by talking with the child about plants and how they grow from seeds, and what needs to be done to keep a garden growing. Extending the conversation back-and-forth allows the caregiver to introduce new concepts and helps children build language knowledge as well as learn how to express their own ideas in words.

ONE-ON-ONE. Talking one-on-one gives the provider a chance to repeat (say back), extend (add to), and revise (recast or restate) what children say. Children have a chance to hear their own ideas reflected back. In addition, one-on-one conversations provide opportunities to either contextualize the conversation according to the individual child's understanding or tap children's understanding of abstract concepts. Caregivers should try to hold individual conversations with children each day.

Some good times for one-on-one conversations are arrival and departure (if children arrive or leave at different times), center time, and during shared reading with one or two children.

DESCRIPTION. Narrating children's activities is a way for caregivers to not only introduce new vocabulary but also encourages deeper understanding of new words so they can begin to define and explain the meaning of these words. Narrating also introduces and illustrates sentence structures. Verbs, prepositions (such as for communicating direction, location), adverbs (such as for characterizing intensity), and generally the kind of labeling that places new words immediately in a natural context (because the objects or actions are present or occurring at that moment). Describe what children are doing while they are doing it. Talk with children during formal activities and in informal settings, such as snack, clean up, outdoor playtime. Follow up with conversation about what children did during the activities.

For example, the care provider is helping a child mix the paints for finger painting. While the child is mixing, the teacher describes what the child is doing: "Now you're putting the powder into the cup filled with water. I see how the water is turning the color of the powder. You're stirring the mixture with the popsicle stick so that the water and powder mix. Good job!"

SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE MEANING OF MANY WORDS

Use rich vocabulary and support children in developing a deep understanding of the meaning of words—providing multiple definitions and examples, connecting new words with concepts children already know.

For example, as part of a science experiment in a real life preschool classroom, the teacher is introducing a new concept, “absorption.” The teacher is demonstrating the words absorb and repel by showing how a paper towel absorbs water and a plastic lid repels it.

Teacher: “What do you see happening to the water?”

Child: “The water’s going into the paper.”

Teacher: “How is the water going into the paper?”

Child: “It’s soaking it up.”

Teacher: “It is soaking it up! Another word we use to say this is *absorb*. The paper is *absorbing* the water and holding it the same way a sponge does. How much water do you think I could pour onto the paper and it would still be absorbed?”

Child: “Well, some of the water is already leaking out. So maybe not any more.”

Teacher: “Let’s see what happens when we pour water on the plastic. Does it absorb it?”

Child: “No! It’s sliding off.”

Teacher: “That’s right. The plastic repels the water. It slides off just like your said.”

What can we learn from this teacher? The teacher is using this experience as both a science and an oral language building experience. Questions are being used to engage the child in conversation, and new vocabulary words are being introduced—such as “absorb” and “repel”—to describe the actions taking place, and relating the new words to something (the sponge) that the child already knows about while providing information to deepen the child’s understanding of the meaning of these words.

Children need reasons to talk and interesting things to talk about

How can caregivers make time for talking and include it in their day? How do caregivers get good conversations going?

Think about the “talk times” during the day. Caregivers spend a lot of time talking to and with children about rules and schedules. This is talking **at** children and should be limited. That leaves **talking with children** time, and a good place to start this is to talk about what the child is doing and things that interest the child. By basing conversations with children on activities and ideas that are of interest to the children themselves, caregivers can help children practice expressing ideas and requesting information through conversations throughout the day.

Setting up classroom and learning environments that encourage children to use complex and interesting vocabulary and concepts help provide children with the information needed for understanding the meaning of what they will be asked to read. Environments that support a variety of types of child language are optimal.

PERSONAL CONTENT Children like to talk about themselves (where they got their new shoes, what their favorite color is) or about what they are doing (what they are building with blocks, what they are making with Play-Doh). Children will talk about things that are familiar to them and that draw on their knowledge (family activities, playing with friends and neighbors). In the example below, the caregiver asks a child about the structure she is building but also takes the opportunity to recast the child’s statements (adding a specific term, animal hospital; correcting by restating, in the ambulance with the siren going) and to extend (by restating in a complete sentence):

Teacher: “What in the world are you making with those blocks, Susan?”

Child (Susan): “It’s a place for sick animals.”

Teacher: “An animal hospital?”

Susan: “Yeah, this cow got hurt and the dogs brought him in the siren.”

Teacher: “Oh my goodness, they brought her in the ambulance with the siren going? What’s happening now?”

STORYTELLING When children can tell stories about their own lives, they try out new vocabulary, use language to organize thinking, and exercise their imaginations. The caregiver's role is often to build on children's ideas, add new words, and model sentence structure by posing questions and elaborating or extending what children say. For example:

Teacher: What did you do at your sister's birthday party on Saturday?

Child: We had a piñata and some cake with [gestures]...

Teacher: With candles on it?

Child: Yeah, with candles. And also, we could use those to start a fire if you aren't careful.

Teacher: Right, what might happen if you weren't careful?

Child: It could catch fire...

NEW INFORMATION Introducing new and stimulating experiences (interesting objects, field trips) encourages talk about topics with rich, interesting content. Children are more likely to have extended conversations if they are talking about topics that stimulate their thinking. In addition, talking about past and future experiences—experiences that are not occurring here and now—is a crucial skill for children; it develops their capacity for abstract thinking.

Teacher: Who remembers what we saw at the construction site?

Boy 1: There was a giant crane.

Boy 2: But not the animal, the truck.

Teacher: The construction vehicle, that kind of crane?

Boys 1&2: Yeah. It was HUGE!

Teacher: What was it doing?

Boy 2: It was picking up a big thing.

Teacher: Yes, it's called an I-beam? Why do you think it's called that?

Boy 1: Maybe because it looks like the letter I—it's long and skinny and has those short pieces on the ends.

Teacher: I think that's right. What do you think they need an I-beam for?

PLAY Taking on new roles in play and performance provides the opportunity to use language in new ways through songs, plays, show-and-tell, dramatic play.

For example, two children in the dramatic play area are pretending to be at an office. They use specific vocabulary words with each other about an office, such as "computer," "printer," "Xeroxing."

EXTENDED CONVERSATION Talk to children personally, one-on-one or in a small group. Have conversations with each child that go back and forth multiple times. Build on what the child says by adding new words or new ideas. Ask questions that encourage children to use language to express more abstract ideas, such as things from their imaginations, or predictions about things that might happen in the future.

MODELING LANGUAGE Caregivers should use language that includes rich vocabulary, abstract words and concepts, and a variety of grammatical forms. One important way that children learn about language is through hearing other people talk.





Reading with children is an opportunity for conversation.

Sharing books with children offers one of the best opportunities for conversations that build oral language, especially when children are engaged in answering questions and discussion. Books with lots of interesting illustrations and simple text are best for encouraging young children to talk about what is happening in the pictures and storylines. As children get older, books are important in exposing them to new ideas, new words, and new worlds.

Sharing stories helps children build oral language in a variety of ways—developing children’s speaking and listening skills, introducing new concepts or information, and increasing both vocabulary and the ability to define and explain the meanings of new words. You can help focus children’s attention on the vocabulary and concepts and use them as a basis for conversations after the shared reading experience.

The types of books available can make a difference in children’s interest in and use of books for learning and enjoyment. Many available children’s books contain rich vocabulary in a natural context. They have a variety of words that might not otherwise come up in daily conversation, and those words often occur in complete sentences in the books. There should be an adequate supply of books of different types available to children—fiction and non-fiction, poetry, stories, children’s reference books (picture dictionaries or encyclopedias) as well as “information books”—single-topic books that explore different features, characteristics, or circumstances of the topic, such as books on butterflies, reptiles, the weather, transportation—that allow children to get information or answer questions. Books that have interesting content, rich vocabulary, and detailed illustrations are powerful for helping children build oral language and vocabulary, an understanding of the meaning of words they hear and read, and an understanding of how language works, such as how sentences are formed, how our language uses punctuation, and the like.

Make shared reading more powerful in building oral language

Research suggests that the way that adults read with children can make a difference in how effective the experience is in building children's oral language skills. Go beyond labeling—including asking children to recall (checking their listening comprehension as well as memory), predict, speculate, describe, and ask questions—helps extract more language development opportunities from shared reading.

READ WITH A SMALL GROUP Shared reading is most effective when done with a small group of 1 - 3 children. This usually allows the caregiver to draw each child into the book through questions and conversation about the pictures and plot.

FOCUS ON VOCABULARY Caregivers pick books that include new words and ideas and explicitly call attention to the new and interesting vocabulary words in books that intentionally help children understand the core meanings of words.

- ✓ Tell the child what the word means.
- ✓ Point to a picture in the book that illustrates the word.
- ✓ Connect the new word to words the child already knows.
- ✓ Give examples of the word.
- ✓ Encourage the child to use new words in conversations.

EMPHASIZE THE USE OF ABSTRACT LANGUAGE Caregivers encourage children to use language to communicate thinking about things that they cannot actually see in the books. Ask children to use language to talk about things that might happen in the story that they haven't yet read about, or things that could happen. Children should be encouraged to use language to express their imagination and ideas.

- ✓ Ask children to predict what might happen in the story.
- ✓ Ask children to imagine what characters in the story might be thinking or feeling.
- ✓ Ask questions that require the child to use language to analyze the meaning of what is happening in the book.

ASK QUESTIONS AND ENCOURAGE DISCUSSION During shared reading, ask questions about the pictures and story to encourage children to use language, including abstract language.

- ✓ Ask younger children to label pictures: *“Do you remember what this animal’s name is?”*
- ✓ Ask younger children to describe details of the pictures or story: *“How is the fire engine getting to the people at the top of the building?”*
- ✓ When they have had practice with a story, ask the child to recall something about the story: *“Can you tell me what happened to Isabella the night before?”*
- ✓ Ask an older child to predict what’s going to happen in the story: *“What do you think is going to be there in the morning when Peter looks in his pocket for the snowball?”*
- ✓ Ask an older child to imagine events beyond the story: *“If you lived in the desert, what kind of house would you build?”*

For older children, book discussions should encourage children to think—to predict, draw conclusions about why characters act or feel the way they do.

READ STORIES MORE THAN ONCE Take advantage of the fact that children have favorite books, and they quickly learn what happens in the story and are eager to talk about what they know. Use repeated readings to extend conversations about the story.

- ✓ Children can answer questions about the story—who, where, what, why, how many, how much, how long, and how far.
- ✓ With some prompting, they can connect stories to their own real life experiences.

BUILD ON THEMES Pick out books that are about the same theme, such as “under the sea” or “the rain forest,” including non-fiction or expository books.

- ✓ Reading several books on the same theme gives children a shared topic for extended, rich conversations.
- ✓ Conversations about a theme provide opportunities for the provider to “recycle” vocabulary—use the new theme-based words and encourage children to use them. This helps children remember the new words and deepens their understanding of the meanings of the words.
- ✓ Theme-related activities, such as constructing a mural that shows different fish and coral, further encourage children to use and learn the new language from the books that have been read together.



Talking with Children Makes a Difference

This booklet is intended to show caregivers how important the words are that they use with children in their care. The ways in which caregivers talk and read with children and the kind of environment caregivers set up can affect the development of oral language skills that are a crucial underpinning for children's later reading achievement.

By exposing children to new, rich vocabulary and concepts in spoken and printed sentences and helping children understand the meaning of words and sentences, caregivers help children build their own knowledge of words and speech to use in expressing themselves and in interpreting the meaning of print.

The more that caregivers *intentionally* make time for talking and sharing experiences such as...

- extended, contextualized conversations with individual children
- reading books with interesting and rich concepts
- engaging children in discussions and questions about the book
- modeling speaking in complete sentences in questions, responses, and statements
- providing opportunities for children to talk about things and events that are not in the here-and-now—past, present, and imaginary

...the more support there is for children's language development and later reading comprehension success.

The best news is that these are just the kinds of experiences that most children enjoy and seek out, so it won't be hard to make a care setting into a "language lab" for children.

Quick Reference Guide

LITERACY. All the activities involved in speaking, listening, reading, writing and appreciating both spoken and written language.

EARLY LITERACY SKILLS. Skills that begin to develop in the preschool years, such as alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, writing name, print knowledge, and oral language. Research has shown that these skills may provide a foundation for later-developing, more mature reading and writing skills.

Note: Early literacy skills are sometimes called “emergent,” “precursor,” “foundational,” or “predictive” literacy skills, to distinguish them from more conventional, mature reading and writing.

ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT. The development of knowledge and skills that allow children to understand, speak, and use words to communicate.

Speaking skills

- ✓ Producing the sounds of language
- ✓ Understanding what words mean and the connections among words
- ✓ Using words conventionally—for example, to put together words in the right order
- ✓ Using conventional forms of words, for example, plurals and appropriate forms of verbs to indicate things that happened in the past or might happen in the future
- ✓ Using language for different purposes—to express ideas and feelings, to obtain or communicate information, to negotiate social disagreements, etc.

Listening skills

- ✓ Understanding what other people are saying when they speak
- ✓ Detecting, manipulating, or analyzing the auditory aspects of spoken language
- ✓ Enjoying listening to stories
- ✓ Following oral instructions

Communication skills—for talking and listening

- ✓ Understanding the social rules of conversation—taking turns, listening when someone else is talking
- ✓ Understanding and using the rules of grammar
- ✓ Asking questions to get information
- ✓ Engaging peers and adults

Vocabulary skills—for talking, listening, and conversation

- ✓ Understanding a large collection of words and their meanings
- ✓ Understanding the inter-relationship among words—for example, subordinate and super-ordinate words (e.g., dogs and cats are both types of animals)
- ✓ Extending own vocabulary to create new meaning

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The National Institute for Literacy, an agency in the Federal government, is authorized to help strengthen literacy across the lifespan. The Institute provides national leadership on literacy issues, including the improvement of reading instruction for children, youth, and adults by dissemination of information on scientifically based research and the application of those findings to instructional practice.

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